

A Study of the Hafizullah Amin Assassination



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Preface

The old saying goes that those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it. This work studies many factors that close protection professionals needed to and yet failed to consider when it came to protecting their principal. It is my hope that this serves to remind executive protection professionals of the importance of understanding the strategic and operational contexts in which their principals exist. Commander in Chief of the Continental Army George Washington stated, “The necessity of procuring good intelligence is apparent and need not be further urged.” Protective intelligence is a necessity for the formulation of proper risk assessment and action. We must expand far beyond simple templates and short-range intelligence into strategic intelligence and warning so that we can predict over-the-horizon threats and the potentiality thereof to our principals. Hopefully, this provides meaningful lessons to the men and women charged with bodyguarding the lives of others.

Introduction

Hafizullah Amin, the President of Afghanistan, was assassinated on December 27th, 1979. Elite KGB Spetsnaz operators executed the attack while supported by Soviet Army Spetsnaz and airborne troops. The attack was not one only of surprise but one of incredulity. A study of this attack provides several lessons which dignitary and executive protection professionals may find helpful to help them think about similar issues that may affect the protection afforded to their principals.

This study includes numerous sources written by foreign ambassadors and researchers and first-hand sources present during the assassination. There are a surprising amount of discrepancies between dates and the narrative given for specific events. Where possible, the source chosen to be used was that of the Soviet officers and Afghans that participated in the events themselves, as these seem to be the most reliable. Where direct testimony is unavailable, the most agreed-upon version of events is given. No matter which version of events you take, however, I believe you will find that the Soviet assassins pulled off a feat that should be remembered in the annals of courageous warriors alongside the likes of Hannibal, King Leonidas and his 300 Spartans, the British Light Brigade, or Horatius Cocles.

Who Was Hafizullah Amin?



Hafizullah Amin “the Great Pupil,” and the man he would betray, “the Great Leader,” President Nur Taraki

Amin was the latest national leader in a string that had risen through blood politics. The history of that Central Asian country is not one of gentle transitions of power. There have been numerous coups and assassinations throughout the country’s past. Amin took power in a coup, as did his predecessor. The predecessor before him also seized power in a coup, though at least that ousted leader, the last Afghan king, did survive.

Amin was not new to the government. He was a long-standing member of the communist People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) and was third in line for party leadership. He was appointed the Revolutionary Council’s Deputy, a position akin to Speaker of the House, in April 1978 when the communists seized power by killing the nation’s first president, Mohammed Daoud Khan. Despite his position as third-man within the PDPA, he had closer ties to the president than the number two-man, Prime

Minister Babrak Karmal.¹ The People’s Democratic Party was made comprised of two factions: *Khalq* (Masses) and *Parcham* (Banner). The two factions had split, but their Soviet allies convinced them to reform the overall PDPA. Nur Taraki, a Khalqist, became the president after the coup, and Karmal, a Parchamite, became the prime minister.²

Following the revolution, Khalq outmaneuvered Parcham and began minimizing their role in the new government. Amin conspired with the president to have the prime minister and other senior Parcharmites appointed as ambassadors to remove them from the country and thus separate them from their native support base. This allowed the Khalq to run it as they pleased. Accusations of treason were flung around like paper airplanes, many to settle old personal or tribal scores. The Revolutionary Council (the president’s cabinet) turnover rate was high.

Amin was crafty. He began concentrating power into his own hands. When he could, he took over the duties himself, such as taking on the role of minister of defense for a time. In other areas, he filled the roles of ousted ministers with kinsmen and people personally loyal to him.

¹ In the Afghan government at the time the prime minister position was akin to the US Vice President.

² This was a type of compromise to maintain the PDPA as a united party of Khalq and Parcham.

By September 1979, Amin was finally ready to seize power himself. He first attempted to succeed by having the president's plane shot down in what would look like a mistake.³ When that failed, he created a premise to launch a coup. On September 14th, Amin's loyalist forces laid siege to the Arg (Citadel), the presidential palace, and he was announced as president of the country the following day.

Presidential Protection

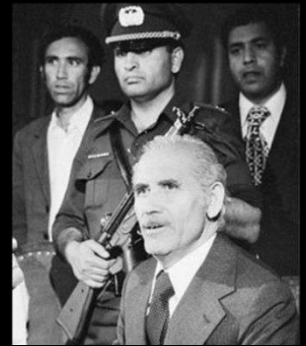


President Daoud escorted by uniformed PSD and his plain-clothed personal protection officers

The Presidential Guard protected the president and his family. There were three components: personal bodyguards, the Presidential Security Detail, and the Security Brigade. The personal bodyguards wore plain clothes. Readers should not be confused into thinking this was an elite team similar to the close protection officers on the US President's Presidential Protective Detail. US Secret Service officers move up through the ranks and are selected for their qualitative performance in previous assignments. In Afghanistan, family connections can get someone out of their village in the hinterland and toting a firearm to protect another family member that has worked their way into a position of power. Amin's plain-clothed bodyguards were a mix of family members from his tribe and people he had grown to trust. They were more like a mob boss' entourage.

The PSD, on the other hand, were government forces. This was considered a unit of distinction to serve in. Many had risen through the ranks, some coming from elite units such as commando units. Often, they attended advanced military schools within the Soviet Union. They wore military uniforms modified to distinguish them from Army soldiers. Their white duty belts, piping, and hats set them apart.

The Security Brigade comprised three battalions totaling between 1,800 and 2,000 personnel. They had heavy weaponry, including mortars, machine guns, and even tanks, at their disposal. The unit was previously known as the House Guard when the unit protected the Arg. After the April Revolution, the communists renamed the Arg the People's House. Major Sabri Jandad was the brigade commander. He had the authority to command assistance from outside the Security Brigade and receive reinforcements for his mission. It appears that Major Jandad was also in charge of the overall security of Amin and his family, not just the uniformed troops of the Security Brigade. He had also served as the commander of the Security Brigade during President Taraki's reign but made a timely decision to stand down the troops during the coup.



PSD officer with a Heckler & Koch MP5 submachine gun guarding President Taraki

Threat Analysis

The Worker's Intelligence Service (KAM) conducted internal counterintelligence and provided intelligence to the Presidential Guard.⁴ KGB advisors supported them in turn. Due to their relative weakness external to the country, they likely relied primarily on Soviet intelligence for their foreign intelligence. That meant some of the intelligence they consumed was possibly tainted by Soviet bias and perhaps may even have included

³ Amin convinced a loyal radar officer in an air defense unit to misidentify the president's plane as an enemy aircraft. The KGB discovered the plot and worked with the Afghan intelligence apparatus, the AGSA, to disarm the unit.

⁴ The AGSA was renamed the KAM after Amin seized control of the government and removed the loyalist minister Asadullah Sarwari from his position as its commander.

misinformation by the Soviets so the Afghans would reach specific conclusions and act in a way that furthered Soviet interests.



The Soviet formed Afghan intelligence service went through a number of upheavals as suspected loyalists to former leaders were purged and the agency renamed (AGSA, KAM, KhAD)

Domestic Adversaries

The 1978 communist coup in Afghanistan was not a popular revolution throughout the country. Kabul was a figurehead of national power. The new People's Democratic Republic of Afghanistan lacked national control. Afghan governments were supposed to recognize the platitudes given to them by the rural communities to pretend to be the king/president of the whole nation without actually trying to rule the entire country. The armies could maintain order in their larger cities to a degree. Yet the rural tribal lands were still governed by the tribal systems and many on Islam's Sharia law. They had no wish to adopt the communists' modernization programs either economically or spiritually.

Within two months of the Saur Revolution, the new Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (DRA) faced armed resistance from outside Kabul, initially from non-Islamist factions.ⁱ Famous Northern Alliance leader, Ahmad Shah Masoud, established a resistance base as early as 1978 in Nuristan to fight the Afghan communist government.ⁱⁱ The PDPA also faced resistance from other communists. There were non-Marxists such as Maoists and Marxists that advocated an Afghanistan nationalist policy rather than close ties with the Soviet Union that fought against the PDPA's government.

The PDPA angered the landowners by stealing land and attempting disastrous redistribution policies, which sent the nation's agricultural economy into a downward spiral. Government officials attempting to enforce land reform through theft and redistribution were often beaten and expelled or kidnapped by the rural Afghans whose land they tried to steal.ⁱⁱⁱ Some disappeared forever.

Amin may not have been the president for the first 18 months of the revolution, but there was no denying that he was deeply involved in the oppression of his people from the very start. By the April Revolution's first anniversary, 25 of Afghanistan's 28 provinces were in open rebellion.^{iv} The government went on a spree, killing more than 27,000 "enemies of the state."^v Despite the atrocities, the Afghan people were not cowed. The DRA Army only maintained complete control of three provinces when the Soviets intervened: Kabul, Kunduz, and Baghlan.^{vi} While provincial capitals hosted army garrisons, they did not control much outside the cities. The provinces of Laghman, Kunar, Paktia, and Paktika were entirely under rebel control. Rebel forces held as much as "90% of the territory and all the main lines of communications in the provinces of Jowzjan, Takhar, Badakhshan, Logar, Ghowr, Kapisa, Ghazni, Zabol, Helmand, Farah, Herat, and Badghis."^{vii}

Nor was it just the war outside Kabul that was brutal. Political imprisonment in Afghanistan was vicious and often lethal. Post-invasion, the Parchamites released a list of executed prisoners they had been able to compile. It held over 12,000 names.^{viii} However, a Russian general estimated that the actual number of executions was over 50,000.^{ix} Despite Taraki's position as the president, Amin was seen as the architect of this slaughter by the Afghan people, according to a December 2nd, 1979, US embassy telegram.

By Amin's demise, the Afghan Army was reduced from its authorized strength of 100,000 to 40,000. Amin had increased the purges of its officer corps that began under Taraki and removed some of the most experienced and respected leaders. He replaced them with Pashtuns loyal to him, that were put through an accelerated three-month leadership course.^x The PDPA elongated the current conscription period from one to three years. With the army suffering purges and so little of the military supporting the communists, this accelerated the desertions and flow of draft dodgers fleeing to Pakistan.^{xi}

With Amin in power, just about everyone hated him: the Shia, the rural population, the Muslims, the Parchamites and other non-Khalqist communists, the Khalqists that were Taraki loyalists, enemies of his tribe,



Ahmad Shah Masoud
The "Lion of Panjshir"

and the friends and family members of the tens of thousands of people killed by the regime. If that list is not long enough, his Presidential Guard certainly had to deal with the usual conspiracy theorists, the crazies that fixate on VIPs, those that might want to hurt him simply for their notoriety, and those within the government leadership and military that might want the presidency for themselves.

Khalq



Khalq (Masses) the faction of the poor and working class

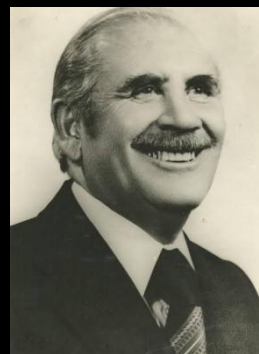
As executive protection professionals, it is important to remember that enemies can come from within the principal's clique, business, or other groupings of people in which they find themselves. If a principal is a leader, remember there are likely people just as ambitious and looking at moving their way up in the organizational or social hierarchy. There is also the possibility that the principal does something to make enemies within the group, whether it is their policies or simply their attitude and how they treat people. It is important to remember that Amin was a conniving snake before he became the Afghan president. He manipulated to have his enemies moved out of his way, some of them imprisoned, tortured, and executed on accusations of treason.

The first plot against Amin is believed to have occurred on September 11th, 1979, the same day Amin hatched his own plot to kill President Taraki, which the KGB foiled. In turn, Asadullah Sarwari, the head of the AGSA, is supposed to have dispatched two snipers to ambush the then-prime minister on his route from his residence to the airport. Sarwari's cousin, Aziz Akbari, was a secret Amin loyalist and a spy. He reported the affair to Amin. Amin had Yaqub Khan send troops to secure the airport. Amin drove to the airport in a private vehicle rather than his government car via an indirect route. Although Khan assured him the airport was secure, he still wore a ballistic vest beneath his clothing.

Amin was far crueler than his predecessor. Unlike Taraki, he did not just persecute Parchamites. Once he was in the seat of power, he began hunting down anyone who had ever opposed or spoken out against him, including his fellow Khalqists.^{xii} The country suffered greatly as its most educated and skilled people needed to keep the country running were killed or imprisoned.

In October, a handful of DRA officers loyal to Taraki commandeered three tanks from the Seventh Division and advanced on Kabul. This may have been part of a planned uprising on October 12th, in which approximately 300 officers within the Seventh and Eighth Divisions and the 5th Air Force Division were supposed to launch a coup. However, Amin learned of the plan and had many officers arrested, including a DRA Air Force pilot that was supposed to signal the attack by firing a rocket over Kabul.^{xiii}

Three of Amin's most significant enemies were at large at the time of his death. The AGSA chief Sarwari was probably the most feared. Aslam Watanjar had been the nation's defense minister. Sayed Gulyabzoi had served as the communications minister. They were allegedly part of the plot to have snipers kill Amin on September 11th. They all certainly took part in attempting to rouse the DRA Army on September 14th to defend Taraki and pre-empt Amin's coup by arresting him. Instead, just like in their first plot, army officers loyal to Amin informed his lieutenants of the threat against him. The KAM was now actively hunting them.



Amin's mentor and founder of the Khalq faction, Nur Taraki, whom Amin overthrew on September 14th, 1979 and had smothered to death with a pillow on October 8th.

Parcham



Parcham (Banner) the educated intellectuals of the PDPA.

Amin had been the Darth Vader to Taraki's Palpatine. He had been instrumental in ousting Karmal and helping purge the government of Parchamites. They maneuvered to have the senior Parcham ministers within the new government sent to overseas posts as ambassadors while they consolidated power in Afghanistan.^{xiv} Even Babrak Karmal had not been spared despite his position as prime minister. He was appointed the Afghan ambassador to Czechoslovakia.

In September of 1978, the Khalqis allegedly foiled a Parchamite coup plot. The remaining Parchamite ministers in the cabinet were dismissed. The Parchamite ambassadors, including Karmal, were fired from their posts and denied Afghan citizenship, barring their return to their homeland. It is questionable whether such a plot existed or whether it was a lie concocted by Amin and his former boss to justify their planned persecution.

The PDPA was fractured by Khalq's persecution and the murder of Parchamites at home. The Army purged Parchamite officers, and Khalqi interrogators eliminated many of them.^{xv} Parcham consisted of Afghanistan's intelligentsia, or educated class, while Khalq, for the most part, was made up of the peasantry and lower classes.

Amin and his predecessor failed to eliminate Karmal as a potential threat. The Afghan government issued a warrant for his arrest after removing him as ambassador, but the Czechoslovakians refused to extradite him. The KGB foiled a plot by the Afghan government to assassinate him after that. Therefore, the formerly second most powerful man in the Afghan government and senior Parchamite was at large. The Afghan security services had a right to be fearful. Daoud had been in a similar position when he launched a coup and ended the Afghan monarchy.

Non-PDPA Communists

Some protection professionals might fail to see a plot from those considered to be on the same side in the periphery. They have similar goals, but unlike the inner circle, they are not close enough to likely have been personally angered by dealings with the principal. However, those that one might mentally lump as being on the same side often have very nuanced differences, which an outsider may not understand to be as serious as it is. It was this way in Afghanistan. Communism is a sliding scale with many different factions and various beliefs on what 'true' communism is. Nor does the presence of a communist philosophy prevent there from being additional political considerations such as globalism vs. isolationism.

When it comes to protective intelligence and identifying threats, it is important to understand how the various shades of a color, or in this case, the multiple subcategories of so-called allies, can still be antagonistic to one another. Here in the United States, for instance, perhaps a principal is a member of the Democrat or Republican parties. Therefore, it is easy to see the other side as a threat to the principal. However, it is important to recognize the sliding scale of the principal's party. Some may not find them extreme enough on issues considered party lines and, therefore, may consider they work too closely with the other party. Others may find them too extreme and want the party to take a more middle-of-the-road approach.

The PDPA did not speak for all the communists of Afghanistan. The PDPA was a Marxist movement that wanted close alignment with the Soviet Union. Maoists, who followed the Chinese communist philosophy, were some of the first enemies of the Taraki regime and posed a significant threat in trying to undermine the Kabul government.^{xvi} There were also communist nationalists who were primarily represented by a group called Sitam-e-Milli. The Sitam-e-Milli was an offshoot of the PDPA that broke away before the Saur Revolution. They desired an Afghanistan First policy rather than close alignment with the Soviet Union. It was small on the scale of internal issues as they, like all communists, had very little support among the Afghan people.^{xvii}

Mujahedeen

Protection professionals should always be worried about people who perceive themselves as being persecuted by their principal. Whether it be politicians taking actions such as shutting down churches for Covid or supporting Israeli action in Palestine, or even social media company CEOs that pursue politicized censoring of people on the opposing political spectrum, people can feel persecuted. Protection professionals must understand that when a person feels trapped and unjustly targeted, they may push back violently. And it is up to each individual to decide when they feel persecuted, whether the principal or the protection professional would agree or not.

People often have the wrong historical understanding of the mujahedeen. Many people think that they formed in response to the Soviet invasion. That is incorrect. The mujahedeen fight against the Afghan government was actually what drew in the Soviets. The Islamic fighters were pushing back against the secular reforms that the communist government tried to impose on the Muslim population. And to be fair to the Afghan communists, militant Islamic fundamentalists preceded them. They were an outgrowth of an Islamic political movement started in 1957 to overthrow what they thought of as a growing atheist and progressive government that acted against the tenants of Islam. Famed mujaheddin Gulbuddin Hekmatyar was one of the founding members.^{xviii} However, the Taraki regime's attack on Islam drove many people into the arms of the fundamentalists.

Islam is the very fabric of Afghan society, and the communists had contempt for it. Their progressive acts included making laws about marriage and educating women that ran counter to long-held Islamic traditions. Taraki foolishly declared that anyone that attempted to obstruct communist policies in the name of Islam would be considered a traitor. Why was this foolish? Simply put, Afghanistan had more mullahs, or religious scholars, than communists. It was on the order of 20:1.^{xix} There were 320,000 mullahs or religious leaders in the country and only approximately 15,000 communists.^{xx} That does not include the millions of average Afghan men and women that were ardent Muslims. Moreover, its non-communist citizens outnumbered the communists 1,000:1.



Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, once a famed warlord, now allegedly part of the Taliban Government

Foreign Adversaries



Afghanistan surrounded by unfriendly neighbors.

Protection professionals must ensure that the scope of their threat analysis is broad or narrow enough for utility. In the case of Amin, his Presidential Guard needed to be aware of foreign as much as domestic adversaries. His national policies had international consequences. The same can be said of any head of state and of many lawmakers at the national level that affect international affairs. However, it may also apply to state government officials who can facilitate or hamper the designs of a foreign entity in their state. Nor is it solely a concern of politicians. CEOs with businesses in foreign countries or rivaling a foreign company's ability may also find themselves in the crosshairs of a foreign nation. With the ability of anyone to reach a broad audience at the touch of a button, even influencers and media personalities may attract international attention. Just because a principal resides in San Francisco does not mean they may not have powerful enemies in Riyadh, Moscow, or Tokyo.

Pakistan



The Pakistani ISI is deft at playing every enemy against each other. They did so then and they do so now.

Afghanistan and Pakistan had a long-standing rivalry. The Afghans refused to recognize the new nation when it broke away from India in 1947. Part of the land claimed by Pakistan was Pashtunistan, home to one of the most formative tribes of Afghanistan. They were cut off from Afghanistan into India (now Pakistan) when colonial Britain arbitrarily set the Durand Line and separated Pashtun kinsmen. Then in 1949, Pakistan attacked an Afghan village which started a long propaganda war between the two countries.^{xxi}

An Islamist refugee influx started in earnest in 1973 after Daoud's coup, which dissolved the Afghan monarchy.^{xxii} More than 400,000 refugees fled the Afghan civil war to Pakistan in the late 1970s. It became a strong power base for Islamic fundamentalists to recruit mujahideen to fight against the communist government in Kabul.^{xxiii} It also served as a base for banned Afghan political parties.^{xxiv} This provided Pakistan with a cheap proxy army similar to the ones the exiled Cubans provided for the United States for the failed Bay of Pigs invasion. The Pakistani Army provided the Afghan refugees with military training and weapons during the regime of Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. The Pakistanis inspired them to attack eastern Afghanistan to spark a general uprising.^{xxv}

During the reign of Zia ul-Haq, who overthrew Bhutto in July 1977, Pakistan began to smooth over relations with Afghanistan. A joint economic commission was established.^{xxvi} This created an economic relief that relieved some of Afghanistan's dependence on the Soviet Union. However, things soured once the communists took over Kabul. Ul-Haq visited Kabul only to be berated by Taraki and told that Pashtunistan and the Northwest Frontier Province were part of Afghanistan.^{xxvii} This put the two countries back on the path of contention.

General Zia ul-Haq needed a way to find support from the inhabitants of the west in the Federally Administered Tribal Area. This was the land of the Pashtun, who had long sought their own nation of Pashtunistan after their tribes had been separated nationally by the arbitrary Durand Line. He needed their support, not their hate. And an easy way to do that was to support their kin in fighting for their lands in Afghanistan.

In March 1979, the KGB assessed that approximately 3,000 anti-regime fighters were pouring into Afghanistan from Pakistan each month.^{xxviii} The head of the KGB, Yuri Andropov, argued that Pakistan might succeed in breaking away Afghanistan's southern provinces and that Pakistan military forces were operating along Afghanistan's southern border.^{xxix, xxx} The KGB and the Afghan security apparatuses shared intelligence on such issues. Amin's security forces were likely well aware of the threats posed by Pakistan, not only nationally, but also must have been concerned about a Pakistani-supported attempt on their principal.

Iran



Following the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Khomeini established the SAVAMA in place of the Shah's SAVAK intelligence agency.

Due to Cold War geopolitics and Iran's status as an American lackey during the 1954-1979 period, relations with Afghanistan cooled. In turn, Afghanistan leaned toward the Soviets. Then in 1979, the Americans lost their hold when a second popular uprising brought Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini to power. It did not improve the relations between the two countries. The religious fundamentalist leader stated in no uncertain terms that Islam and apostate atheist communism could not coexist.

Iran had controlled parts of western Afghanistan provinces several times over the previous 2,000 years. Iran considered land as far east into Afghanistan as Herat, almost 70 miles from the Iran-Afghanistan border, to be Iranian. The city had been the capital of a Persian dynasty barely over 100 years prior.^{xxxi} There were many Shia in western and northern Afghanistan. Iran sought to maintain close relations with the tribes, keeping a presence in its eastern neighbor. The Iranians primarily supported Tajik and Shia Hazara ethnic groups living in Afghanistan.^{xxxii, xxxiii} The

Hazara are ethnically Mongolian but of the Shia religion. The Tajiks are ethnically Persian, the same as Iranians. Iran supplied financial and military assistance to Shia resistance groups such as the Organization of Islamic Victory.^{xxxiv} The Afghan diaspora burdened Iran. Over 200,000 refugees had fled into the Persian nation.^{xxxv} Members of the Iranian military wearing Afghan clothing were captured crossing the border to incite rebellion in Afghanistan's western provinces.^{xxxvi} On June 23rd, 1979, Afghan government forces loaded up Shia citizens of Kabul, many of them ethnic Hazara, and executed them. Their charge? Being alleged supporters of Khomeini.^{xxxvii}

People's Republic of China



A record of a conversation between LI Brezhnev and Taraki on March 20th, 1979, shows that the Afghan leader accused the Chinese of playing an important role in inciting anti-PDPA sentiment and was working in Pakistan to do so.^{xxxviii} KGB officers asserted that the Chinese were training special forces and undercover intelligence officers in the northwest Chinese province of Xinjiang. Once trained, they would be inserted across the border into Afghanistan to coordinate and train Afghan resistance fighters.^{xxxix}

Central Investigations Department (replaced by the Ministry of State Security) carried out internal and foreign intelligence activities as part of the China's attempt to curtail Soviet expansion in Asia.

United States



The Politburo worried the CIA co-opted the Afghan leader

The KGB and KAM shared intelligence on US activities and suspected plots. Russian news articles accurately accused the Americans of meddling in Afghan affairs. Whether the KGB had proof or was simply pointing fingers is unknown. We know now from declassified files that President Jimmy Carter signed a finding for covert action, authorizing \$500,000 to help equip the mujahideen in Pakistan in the summer of 1979. Former National Security Advisor Brzezinski later stated in an interview that this was designed to lure the Soviet Army into Afghanistan.^{xl} One of the reasons Kosygin refused to send Soviet troops to take part in putting down the March 1979 riot in Herat was that the rebels carried foreign-supplied handheld transmitters and could quickly warn the outside world of what was happening inside Afghanistan.^{xli} The Americans would have immediately led to a massive international outcry.

The Presidential Guard might have assessed relations with the United States as warming, or at least below the level at which the CIA might try to kill their principal, as they tried many times with Castro. Amin met with the US charge-d-affairs three times in the short three months he held presidential power.^{xlii} On October 25th, Amin told American newspapers that he hoped the United States would provide further aid to Afghanistan.^{xliii} The Americans made overtures to the Afghans. They planned to build a network of hospitals throughout the country and a metallurgical factory.^{xliv} From a protective intelligence perspective, that seems to indicate a path leading away from violence rather than toward it.

However, there was also concern that the United States was not just trying to sway the Afghan government to its side but also playing with both sides, working with the rebels. The Iranians had released classified documents they captured in the storming of the US embassy, which showed the CIA began meeting with Afghan rebel groups leaders, such as Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, as early as April 1979.^{xlv} Therefore, the Presidential Guard could not eliminate the possibility of a threat to their principal from the United States.

Union of Soviet Socialist Republics



KGB advisors were deeply entrenched in Afghanistan with qualitative HUMINT networks. They advised both the PSD and the KAM.

It is difficult to "Monday-morning quarterback" what the Presidential Guard should have assessed of the motives of the USSR concerning their principal. It was far less clear than the other foreign powers or even domestic situations. Russia's friendship with Afghanistan predated the Union. The Russians sent troops to fight for Afghanistan before in 1929. The Soviets built the majority of the nation's modern infrastructure. The northern neighbor poured billions of dollars in aid into the country. The relationship was strong, including a new treaty of friendship signed between the new Afghan communist government and the Soviets in 1978. The lesson for protection professionals is not to conflate the principal with their organization. Another entity may have a very close relationship with the principal's overall organization, but they might see the principal as a hindrance to that relationship which should be dealt with. Therefore, they may take action to make that happen.

Amin greatly overestimated his popularity with the Soviet Politburo. It seems that the Presidential Guard did as well. The Soviets were dissatisfied with Amin before he assumed the presidency. During a September 10th meeting in Moscow, the Soviet Politburo leaders urged Taraki to "put Amin in his place." However, there are two versions of this. One is that Amin was to be appointed to a foreign post where he could do no harm.^{xlvi} The other is that Premier Brezhnev thought it best to find a more permanent solution along the lines of Anatoly Rybakov's motto, "No man: no problem."

It is unknown just how much the Soviet leadership was, if really at all, included in a plan to kill Amin at that time. After the alleged airport assassination plot, Taraki requested Amin join him for lunch on September 14th. The Soviet ambassador and Generals Ivanov and Pavlovsky were present. However, when Amin arrived, a gunfight broke out between his and Taraki's bodyguards. There is a story that after the assassination attempt and the following coup, Amin slapped Ambassador Puzanov in the face and insulted him, Lenin, Marx, and Premier Brezhnev. This story is likely untrue, but if it did happen, then Amin should have assumed that his relationship with the Soviet Union was at least tenable.

If the Soviets were trying to maintain a politically courteous façade with Amin, the Afghan president made it difficult. On October 6th, Afghan Foreign Minister Shah Wali accused Soviet Ambassador Puzanov of being a conspirator in Taraki's alleged plot to assassinate Hafizullah on September 14th. Wali also accused the Soviets of hiding the three ousted Taraki loyalist ministers.^{xlvii} These accusations came in a meeting of foreign diplomats from the communist nations, excluding China. The foreign minister asked the Soviet Union to dismiss Puzanov from his post. Allegedly though doubtfully, Amin refused a gracious offer by the Soviet Politburo to host him in Moscow.^{xlviii} This story seems like a fanciful Afghan nationalist tale of defiance against the Soviets to inspire patriotism. Amin was still very dependent on the USSR, and other sources indicate he still desired to maintain a close relationship with the communist neighbor to the north.

Amin appeared ungracious to the Soviet Union. He began reducing the power of their military advisors.^{xlix} This was likely infuriating, considering that he and his predecessor begged so strongly to Russia for help and that despite years of military advising, the DRA army was in its worst shape and needed more Soviet control because of those two and their purges of the officer corps. There were also economic issues. Amin raised the issue of Afghan gas being shipped into the Soviet Union without Afghan oversight. The Soviets controlled the trade and paid the Afghans below market value to offset the credit the USSR supplied the DRA. In return, the Soviet Union insisted on a price hike of gasoline it was shipping to Afghanistan, which Amin strongly opposed.¹ At this time, it is important to remember that while Amin is trying to get the Soviets to pay Afghanistan more, they are receiving increasing economic and military aid. This appears egregiously discourteous of him for the sacrifices of the Soviet nation on behalf of the Afghan people.

The USSR Politburo cautioned Taraki against the Stalinist Red Terror he was unleashing on the countryside, but they felt they could have at least worked with him. Like the United States, they, too, saw Amin as the actual mass murderer. They asked how he could justify slaughtering entire tribes of people. In the countryside, he

was wholesale bombing villages and wiping out communities. Amin replied that it was merely the Afghan way.^{li}

There was already distrust of Amin because he attended university in the United States and spoke fluent English, which inspired more suspicion in Moscow about where he might cast his lot.^{lii} Just as much as the Red Scare was going on in the United States and other western nations during the Cold War, the USSR and other communist countries were similarly affected by an Anglo Scare. Something as simple as speaking the language of the adversarial nation seemed suspicious. While the Presidential Guard might have reason to worry less about a threat from the United States due to Amin's overtures to the western country, they should have predicted that any amount of favor gained with one side of the Cold War meant favor lost with their opponent.

The KGB intercepted CIA cables transmitted from Ankara, Turkey, which discussed the possibility of using fervent Islamism to create a new Ottoman Empire to counter Soviet expansion in Asia.^{liii} It is not stated in the references reviewed for this article whether this intelligence was shared with the KGB's Afghan apprentice agency KAM. It might have given their mutual fight against the jihadist threat. Amin's security would have had to understand the Soviets' national security concerns should Afghanistan fall to fundamentalists. If the American goal of a fervent belt of Islamic nations was realized, the Soviet Union assessed it would be in great jeopardy. Therefore, Afghanistan had a significant role to play as a geographical buffer between anti-Soviet Islamic states. It might have helped them understand that the Soviets would do whatever they had to stabilize the country, including removing any weak link such as Amin that might prevent them from doing so.

It was certainly not lost on the Soviets the newfound importance of Afghanistan that occurred in 1979. Iran and Pakistan were America were strong allies until that year. On January 16th, the Iranian monarch was ousted. His people did not forgive the United States for the CIA coup of 1953 that returned the shah to power after the people deposed him. Nor did they forget their scars or their loved ones that suffered under the hand of his brutal secret police, the Savak.^{liv} Nor did they likely forget the famine caused by the 1942-43 Anglo-Soviet invasion. The new regime under Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini signaled an end to America's hold over the country. Any doubt was cast aside in November when followers of the Shia cleric seized the US embassy in Tehran and took its staff prisoner.^{lv} General Valentin I. Varennikov, Commander of the Soviet Army's Ground Forces, said he believed that the USSR Politburo worried that Amin would offer Afghanistan as a replacement for the SIGINT listening posts that the United States lost in Iran that most swayed them to intervene.^{lvi} General Alexander Lyakhovsky stated that Andropov worried that Amin might allow the United States to base Pershing II missiles in the country.^{lvii} Either scenario threatened the Soviet Union's southern republics.

In the same month, a mob of Jamaat al Islam followers burned down the US embassy in Islamabad, Pakistan. They believed a rumor that the United States and Israel facilitated a recent terrorist attack on the Grand Mosque in Mecca. Two Pakistanis and two Americans were killed in the attack. Afghanistan looked more lucrative for the United States to establish a strong presence in Central Asia, with American-Iranian relations severed and American-Pakistani relations strained.

The Politburo claimed that the situation in Afghanistan made the Soviet Union's border insecure. They said, "the Pentagon and the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency were counting on stealthily approaching our territory more closely through Afghanistan." It is not enough for Russia itself to be secure. They desire a no man's land or buffer zone between Russian territory and any force they find threatening, whether it be NATO or Islamic fundamentalism. Russia's early 2022 demands that NATO guarantee never to allow Ukraine to join its ranks is one such example.^{lviii} The Presidential Guard would have understood that the Soviets believed Afghanistan's destabilization made them feel vulnerable and how the Soviet Politburo could conclude, as they did, that removing Amin from power and replacing him was vital in stabilizing the country and protecting the Soviet Union.



Soviet military intelligence, the GRU, was embedded down to every Afghan Army battalion

Some things would have been difficult for the Presidential Guard to assess being a motive for their Soviet allies. Amin began making overtures to the border nations of Iran in October and Pakistan in December.^{lix, lx} He also allegedly started talks with the mujahadeen, expressing his willingness to roll back some anti-Islamic reforms to seek peace. The Soviets had pleaded time and again with Amin and his predecessor to stabilize the country and find a peaceful way to do so. They even sent a special advisor, Safranchuk, to make this happen. Yet when he did it, they saw it as suspicious. This type of irrationality would be complex for any bodyguard to predict unless they had very descriptive intelligence about the adversary which showed such a history. Neither the Presidential Guard nor their KAM intelligence apparatus was likely to possess such intelligence.

The low foreign intelligence capability likely left the KAM unable to predict how international issues that did not even affect Afghanistan may have played into the decision. The 1970s was a challenging decade for the Soviets. Anwar Sadat of Egypt expelled military advisors, although the USSR had supplied them with large amounts of weaponry. A new upstart leader in Iraq named Saddam Hussein was anti-communist. Turkey's new government was anti-communist. The communist influence was retracting rapidly toward Soviet borders. The Soviets needed a win somewhere in the world. Somewhere, an example needed to be set that the Soviet Union could still flex its might.

The communist ties that Amin and his predecessor counted on to enlist Soviet support for their regime might have also been his undoing. Moscow did not share the sentiments of some of their senior advisors in Kabul that the Afghan Army was capable of withstanding the mujahadeen. The Brezhnev Doctrine of 1968 stated that it was the duty of socialist nations to come to the aid of any socialist regime that was in danger of collapsing. This had been the justification for the 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia. Amin and his protectors failed to realize that the Soviets might decide that the same assumption of control was necessary for Afghanistan. They might also determine that the problem was not just external but internal to the communist party. The KAM could have reached the correct conclusion by misinterpreting one major event. Generals Pavlosky and Yepeshev conducted tours of the country. These men made a similar visit to Czechoslovakia before its invasion on a scouting mission. However, their mission, in reality, was a benevolent one. They had come, as stated, to assess the capabilities of the DRA Army to fight the civil war, which, if analyzed correctly, would not have sparked concern among KAM analysts.

Another reason the Presidential Guard might have inaccurately assessed their risk is that they had several Soviet sympathizers or at least Soviets that agreed they were up to managing the country in a way still favorable to Soviet interests. In late October, the senior Soviet political advisor to the Afghan Army, V. Zaplatin, told Moscow he believed the Afghan Army was up to the task of winning against the insurgency.^{lxi} When Defense Minister Ustinov showed him KGB cables claiming the situation in Kabul was dire, the political advisor disagreed. He was aware of the sources the KGB were using and did not trust them. Ambassador Puzanov informed Amin on November 3rd that the Politburo was happy with him and ready to receive him in Moscow. He reiterated this position before his return to the USSR.^{lxii}

This is not to say the Afghans completely trusted their Soviet allies. Amin suspected the Soviets of working against him in the early days of his rule. First, as previously mentioned, he believed or at least claimed that Puzanov was part of the alleged plot to assassinate him on September 14th. Secondly, he had been concerned enough that the Soviets might attempt to save Taraki that he ordered air defense units at Bagram Airbase loyal to him to shoot down any Soviet aircraft that left from the Soviet aerodrome. Then he accused Puzanov of hiding three of the four ousted Taraki loyalists inside the embassy. Amin and his Presidential Guard might have understood that the Soviet congratulations on his ascension were less than sincere had the KAM not failed their task.

The KAM and its predecessor, the AGSA, kept the Soviet embassy and its staff under surveillance as a precaution. Their officers followed Soviet officers and civilian officials around Kabul. The Soviets were well aware and trained in surveillance detection and countersurveillance. They ensured that their scouting attempts were executed in a way not to arouse the surveillance operatives' suspicion.

Previous Soviet Plots and Attempts to Remove Amin

Lending credence to the claim that Brezhnev instructed Taraki to find a more permanent form of removing Amin, a KGB Spetsnaz unit already operating in the country developed a contingency plan to kidnap the prime minister and rendition him to the Soviet Union, where it was generally assumed he would be executed. On the night of Amin's takeover, the unit was mobilized at the Soviet embassy, but leadership ordered them to stand down soon after. With his loyalist forces rallied, he was too well-defended. The Soviets' plan was predicated on him being caught unaware.

First Coup Attempt

On September 18th, two planes arrived at the Soviet aerodrome at Bagram Airbase as part of Operation Rainbow. Aboard the aircraft were Zenith operatives replacing those flying out with the three Taraki loyalist ministers being secreted out of the country. Lieutenant Colonel Mitalin Talybov was one of the passengers. According to the *Mitrokhin Archive*, he was a Directorate S (Illegal Intelligence) operative. However, according to the head of the KGB residency, Colonel Bogdanov, Talybov entered the country initially as a Zenith operative, though he had been in Illegal Intelligence previously. Bogdanov ran into the operative quite by chance. Bagdanov knew that Talybov was an exceptionally skilled and trained chef. He was also an Azerbaijani, his ethnic group being one represented in Afghanistan. Therefore, Bogdanov had the KGB officer flown back out of the country and returned to Directorate S with a new mission. He took the place of a chef that was supposed to be joining Amin's dietary staff.^{lxiii}



The Arg (Citadel) The Presidential Palace

On December 14th, Talybov was finally activated. His mission was to poison Amin. Once the poison took hold, KGB and GRU Spetsnaz units would storm the Arg palace and secure key infrastructure throughout Kabul. He dosed Amin's Coca-Cola with the poison. After delivering the drink, he phoned the Soviet embassy to report his success via a code word and then left the Arg. Spetsnaz troops were mobilized and waiting to hear the word of the president's incapacitation. They planned to wait for it to appear that Afghans had killed their president and

the Soviet troops would be responding as peacekeepers within the capital. The Spetsnaz waited until late in the evening but heard no word. They contrived an important message to be delivered to the president as a means for KGB officers to determine if he was sickened. The messenger found him healthy. It was later determined that the soda's carbonation neutralized the toxin. The Soviet troops maintained readiness until the next day when General Sultan Magometov, the senior military advisor in the country, discovered the plan the KGB was concocting behind his back and called it off due to how preposterous it was.

Asadullah Amin was admitted to the hospital the day after the poisoning. At first, KAM investigators suspected Colonel Bogdanov of poisoning their leader during evening dinner the night before. But during the investigation, they discovered that after leaving the KGB general's home, their boss spent part of the evening with prostitutes. They were tracked down, arrested, and interrogated harshly.^{lxiv} Soviet doctors that attended to him suspected he had a bad case of hepatitis and evacuated him to Moscow for treatment. He would be arrested and sent to Lefterovo Prison on the night of the assassination. Later he would be extradited to Afghanistan, where he was imprisoned, tortured, and executed.

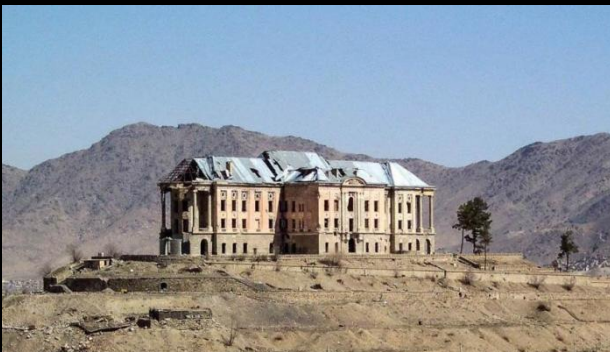
The Presidential Guard and the KAM reasonably failed to see this incident as an assassination attempt. After all, Hafizullah had come down sick, and Asadullah's condition was diagnosed as hepatitis. Even had the doctors correctly concluded he was poisoned, there was reasonable doubt that the Soviets were involved, considering the intelligence chief's association with prostitutes that night. This suspicion would have likely been affected by the bias of a puritanical culture that values conservatism and sees prostitution as taboo. No

references indicate they were aware of the KGB and GRU mobilization. Additionally, with the plan being so small in scale, ludicrously small, as General Magometov deemed it, it was unlikely they received any indication of mobilization that they would have expected any threat directed toward their leader. The plan called for far too few operatives and military support forces to be deemed realistic.

Snipers Considered

Unbeknownst to the Presidential Guard, they succeeded in deterring an assassination by Spetsnaz snipers. Two snipers, Vlamdir Tsvetkov and Fedor Erokhov were assigned the mission. They practiced shooting their rifles at 450 meters on a range at the Soviet aerodrome on Bagram Airbase.^{lxv} The plan was to pull off a JFK-style assassination and shoot Amin en route from his residence to Kabul. The references are vague as to the time frame in which this assassination attempt was to occur. This may have happened before or after Amin changed his residence from the Arg to Tajbeg Palace. What is certain is that the snipers deemed the plan infeasible after studying their target's motorcade operations. The Presidential Guard established a heavy security presence along routes, and the motorcade drivers traveled at a high rate of speed.^{lxvi}

New Presidential Palace Presents Opportunities



The terraced grounds of the palace canalized forces along the road and the staircases.

President Hafizullah Amin and his family moved from the historical chief of state's residence in the Arg located in central Kabul to Tajbeg Palace on the city's outskirts between December 17th and the 20th. According to some sources, the KGB was instrumental in convincing Amin to change residences. However, the palace had been undergoing renovations since at least shortly after the Saur Revolution the year before. While it had been serving as the military chief of staff headquarters, the renovations' ornateness suggested it was not simply being renovated for military staff. More likely, the KGB may have convinced Amin to push up the timetable for the move. The reason for this hypothesis is that while the palace appears to

have been completed, its surrounding security infrastructure was not.

There were some positive aspects security-wise to the new palace. Rather than being in a built-up area on a level plain like the Arg, it was on a hilltop with a commanding view that offered sentries long lines of sight to spot any enemies coming for miles. Its walls are thick, impervious to even light artillery. Three T-54 tanks were moved into dug-in positions along the heights to give them the ability to fire across a wide swath of area if needed while being protected from enemy fire.^{lxvii}

Only a single road accessed the palace. All others were mined. The road was restricted for approximately a kilometer. A "well-reinforced checkpoint protected its entrance." Only vehicles whose drivers had special passes were permitted on the road to the palace.^{lxviii} That access road was protected by seven sandbagged fighting positions manned by members of the Security Brigade armed with machine guns, rifles, and mortars.^{lxix} The road wound around the hill, allowing defenders to fire broadside into the attackers on their approach. There was also an irrigation canal that doubly served as an anti-tank ditch.

The Afghan Army supported the Presidential Guard. One of the most effective defenses against any attack was an air defense regiment with 12 100mm ADA guns and 16 ADA machine guns that could target airborne and ground targets. An understaffed construction battalion of approximately 400 engineers was encamped outside of the rings of protection. The engineer battalion was not a significant deterrent to an enemy force despite their numbers. They were conscripts with only a few lockers of guns at their barracks. However, there was a tank battalion with 32 tanks. Altogether there were approximately 3,000 defenders of the palace. And not

far away in Kabul were two divisions and a tank brigade that could reinforce the defenders if needed, as well as the national police, the Sarandoy.^{lxx}

Despite that, it had drawbacks compared to its former residence. Two massive fortress walls protected the Arg, whereas Tajbeg Palace was laid bare.^{lxxi} The tradeoff for commanding views of the surrounding terrain was that it was also recognizable from afar. If desired, enemy gunners and forward observers could target it with direct or indirect fires from a considerable distance. There also was no concern about collateral damage from using such heavy weaponry or bringing in fighter jets or gunships if they wanted to bombard the building. It was a free-fire zone. The single road also meant that there was no way for the presidential bodyguards to evacuate their principal by vehicle to safety once the palace was compromised. The Spetsnaz planning the attack remarked that one significant positive aspect for them was that, unlike the Arg, which had a road that ran parallel to the entrance, the route to the palace was direct. The commandos had worried they would not be able to get enough speed to crash their IFVs through the gates of the Arg. To their credit, the presidential advisors informed him that Tajbeg Palace's security was not guaranteed, and some allegedly advised against the move.^{lxxii}

The defense plan of the palace did not appear to include evacuating the president. Instead, it was designed to neutralize any force by combat or delay them until Kabul reinforcements could arrive. Unfortunately, the Presidential Guard placed too much trust in their army and Soviet allies to help them.

Trojan Horses Arrive



Special Forces (Spetsnaz) of the Main Intelligence Directorate developed the clever idea of the Muslim battalions which proved crucial here and beneficial in the Soviet-Afghan

Like the Trojans, the Afghans unknowingly welcomed their enemies into their bastion. The despot was so fearful of an uprising by his troops that he asked the Soviets to provide soldiers to serve in his Presidential Guard. It just so happened that the Soviets had such a force ready for that purpose. In April, the GRU had been tasked to create a Spetsnaz battalion to serve as bodyguards for President Taraki. All but one member of the new battalion comprised Soviet citizens from the Central Asian republics; Tajiks, Turkmen, and Uzbeks. Each of these ethnicities already existed within Afghanistan, and these soldiers could speak the local languages, primarily Farsi. They were a covert unit, meant to appear as Afghans so as not to incite the Afghan people over the fact that their president did not trust them to be his guards.^{lxxiii} Unfortunately for Taraki, the unit was not deployed in time to protect him from Amin.

The GRU took great care in preparing the unit. During training, the soldiers were given Afghan uniforms to familiarize themselves with identifying each other. It also helped to provide the uniforms with a worn appearance so that when they arrived in-country, they did not all appear to be wearing brand new uniforms and spark suspicion from the unsuspecting Afghans. Their cover was a unit being redeployed to Kabul from the northern provinces.

This Spetsnaz unit did not have high requirements. It was not an elite unit like the other two Spetsnaz units that would take part in the assassination. Secrecy and racial restrictions prevented them from filling the roles with the most skilled men.

Commanders were loath to transfer their best soldiers, especially when they were not apprised of the necessity of such a move. The requirement aside from ethnicity was

that they must have at least one year of service completed and two hold two military occupational specialties such as radioman, medic, or driver.^{lxxiv} They were introduced into an intensive training cycle to compensate for their deficiencies. The unit conducted more driving and live-fire training in their few months of premobilization than a standard Soviet unit did in two years.^{lxxv} They received some training uncommon to an infantry unit of their type, such as driver's training on the BMP-1 infantry fighting vehicle.^{lxxvi}

The 520-man 154th Special Purpose Detachment (OSN), dubbed the "Muslim Battalion," was transported to Afghanistan on Military Transport Aviation aircraft on December 9th and 10th to Bagram airfield. They were all

dressed in their Afghan uniforms, outwardly indistinguishable from local servicemen. They were ordered to hand in all of their Soviet identification.^{lxxvii} Initially, the unit was slated to participate in the canceled December 15th operation. After that, they were ordered to relocate from the Soviet aerodrome to the perimeter of Tajbeg Palace.

It is unknown how much the average Afghan soldier was aware that the newly arrived unit was comprised of foreigners. Major Jandad and several higher-ranking officers were undoubtedly aware. He met with the battalion commander and executive officer on or about December 22nd. He assigned them to the second of the three concentric rings of security. Their mission was to guard a two-kilometer section of the perimeter. He gave them radios so their troops could coordinate with the Security Brigade. Lastly, he agreed to allow them to build bridges over the irrigation ditch, which doubly served as an anti-tank ditch.

His Soviet counterparts did not betray anything of their plans. Before they met with Major Jandad, the battalion commander and his executive officer were ordered by Colonel General Magometov to go to the palace to coordinate with the major on how to defend the palace. The general did not tell them until after the meeting that he wanted them to take the information they had learned and use it to plan an assault rather than a defense.

The GRU battalion was not the only new arrival. On Christmas Eve, the Soviet Air Force began airlifting Army troops and their equipment into Kabul International Airport. Over 7,700 men, 900 pieces of equipment, and more than 1,000 tons of supplies arrived within 48 hours.^{lxxviii} The next day, the 108th Motorized Rifle Division crossed the Amu Darya River between the USSR and Afghanistan and began driving south. A Soviet general in charge of the invading force met with his Afghan counterpart in Kunduz. References differ on who the Afghan counterpart was. According to former US Ambassador to Afghanistan, Peter Tomsen, the Russian general met with Hafizullah's brother, Abdullah.^{lxxix} Former UK Ambassador to Afghanistan, Sir Rodric Braithwaite, claims General Babadzhan represented the Afghans. Either way, the Russian representative sat through a planning meeting with their Afghan counterpart, discussing the counterinsurgency operations the Soviet Army would assist the Afghan Army with as if nothing was afoot. They determined troop locations in the north where the troops would be stationed. It was all a ruse. The 108th Division continued a hard drive south toward Kabul.^{lxxx} The division blocked the Afghan 7th and 8th Divisions stationed at Rishkor and Qargha from coming to Amin's defense.^{lxxxi}

The Assassins



Spetznaz Group
Alpha

While the Soviet Army was in charge of defeating the Security Brigade and supporting Afghan Army troops outside of the palace, the KGB provided two units of assassins to take the palace itself. Whereas the Army military intelligence's Muslim Battalion was a special purpose force that was not comparable to Western special forces units, the two KGB units were. The KGB employed Alpha and Zenith.

Alpha is a Tier 1 special mission unit similar to the US Army Special Forces Operational Detachment Delta or Delta Force. Their niche is in counterterrorism operations. After the initial December 14th plan fell through, Alpha operatives volunteered or were recruited into a particular unit codenamed *Grom* (Thunder) for the mission. They entered the Afghan nation disguised as Soviet athletes. It seems a peculiar choice given how many Soviet soldiers were already in the country and visible. Likely, this was not done to fool the Afghans but to fool Western intelligence services.

On the other hand, Zenith was a reserve special forces unit of the KGB. The KGB sent highly qualified officers through an Advanced Officer's Course (KUOS). It was an eight-month course where KGB officers spent their time learning the art of assassination, sabotage, long-range reconnaissance, and many other skills. If World War III started, it would be useful in killing key leaders and destroying critical infrastructure inside NATO territory. Zenith was created from the current in-progress class, their training being curtailed at six months so they could deploy to Afghanistan.

Zenith had been in the country since July after the Soviet Foreign Minister asked the KGB to help prevent their diplomats from falling victim to political extremists, as it happened to US Ambassador Dubs.^{lxxxii} They entered the country undercover as advisors, technicians, and Soviet soldiers. They even ran a school for AGSA officers, teaching them some tactics they had just finished learning. They executed Operation Rainbow in mid-September, secreting three of the Taraki loyalist ministers out of the country. Before that, they were the unit assigned to the mission to kidnap the then Prime Minister Amin. In all cases, Zenith was the planned tip of the spear, the first Soviet unit that would have been used to turn their guns on their Afghan allies.

Starting at Operation Rainbow and thereafter, more Zenith operatives were flown into the country. They conducted intelligence activities supporting the more extensive military operation, of which the assassination was only part, Baikal-79. They reconnoitered the Afghan government and military facilities that would be taken at the same time as the assassination to prevent Amin loyalists from resisting.^{lxxxiii} Approximately 130 Zenith operators were in the country by the time of the attack, but less than 35 were assigned to Operation Storm-333.



Zenith, famous or infamous under their later name Vympel

The Plan



Men of the 154th OSN, the "Muslim Battalion"

The strike force would consist of Zenith, Alpha, the Muslim Battalion, and a company of paratroopers from the 345th Guards, broken down into twelve battle groups. The KGB would assault the palace while the Army troops trapped the Afghan forces inside their barracks and kept them from manning their battle positions.

The 1st Battle Group's mission was to set the narrative the Soviets wanted the Afghans to believe. Snipers with suppressed rifles would remove the guards from the three dug-in T-54 tanks. A mounted unit of GRU soldiers would travel up the road, secure the unmanned tanks, and turn their weapons on the palace. This was meant to convince the defenders that some of the Security Brigade were mutinying and that this was an internal Afghan action.

The 9th Battle Group would also move out before the shooting started. The Presidential Security Detachment's barracks were close to the

palace. Once the shooting began, the off-duty PSD officers would arm themselves and rush to protect the president. Therefore, the 9th Battle Group would have to secure their barracks before the shooting started.

The 4th, 5th and 6th Battle Groups would secure the barracks of the Security Brigade's 1st, 2nd, and 3rd battalions. The 6th Battle Group's mission was the most difficult of the three. The Afghan tank brigade with more than 30 tanks was collocated with the 3rd Battalion, pitting the 100 Spetsnaz against approximately 700 Afghan soldiers. Therefore, the 12th Battle Group would lend fire support. The 1st Battle Group would also assist after taking over the dug-in T-54s.

The 8th Battle Group's mission was to capture the guns of the air defense regiment on a nearby hill. The air defense unit's weapons were the most significant threat to the Soviets, followed closely by the tank battalion. If the regiment manned their guns and canted them downward, the armor of the BMP and BMD infantry fighting vehicles would not have saved the Soviet troops.

The 10th Battle Group would capture the Construction Brigade. It was the least significant threat the Soviets faced. Unlike the elite Afghan guards and commandos as part of the Security Brigade forces, the engineering unit was primarily composed of conscripts who were general laborers more than they were soldiers. Their leadership spent most of their time in Kabul rather than with their men. But the barracks still had armories which the engineers could arm themselves if they chose to fight and therefore could not be ignored.

The 7th, 11th, and 12th Battle Groups were fire support units with antitank missiles, heavy machine guns such as the ZSU, and AGS-17 grenade launchers. These units would provide fires to the direct-action units across the battlefield. Additionally, they would lay suppressive fires on the palace to force the Presidential Security Detachment to abandon the building's defenses.

The 2nd and 3rd Battle Groups, made up of Zenith and Alpha operatives, were intended to storm the palace. The 2nd Battle Group would advance up the solitary road, peppering the seven fortified fighting positions with fire from their armored vehicles' guns while they advanced. They would dismount and launch a frontal assault on the palace. The 3rd Battle Group would deploy at the staircase along the east side of the hill and take it. Together the two units would fight their way inside and assassinate the president. All other troops were to stay outside.

Despite their plan to use speed and surprise, the attack was still extremely high risk, and its outcome was doubted. Generals Magemotov and Ivanov refused to sign Kolesnik's plan on the eve of the operation. If the mission was a disaster, they wanted no record that they had approved it. After its success, they told him to bring it to them to sign, but he refused them.^{lxxxiv} Oleg Balashov, the commander of Alpha group, stated in a 2009 interview with Russia Today that as he and the other members of *Grom* looked up at the palace from their barracks, "to all military estimates, it was very reckless, and that was my view also."^{lxxxv} Rustam Tursunkulov said he resignedly hugged each of his soldiers before the battle and told them, "I'll go. You follow."

It was a daring plan. The manpower ratio alone was 7:1 in favor of the Afghans. Soviet intelligence estimated that in terms of firepower, the ratio was 15:1 in favor of the Afghans. Military strategists favored using superior numbers on the attack; as Napoleon Bonaparte said, "Quantity has a quality all of its own." Clausewitz advised that an attacking force should be three times the size of the defending party. From the analytical standpoint of the attackers and the defenders, this would seem to be an ill-fated plan at best. Therefore, it is understandable that KAM and the Presidential Guard did not foresee such an operation. The success of Operation Storm-333 would be as improbable as that of Hannibal 2,194 years earlier on the battlefields of Cannae.



Men of Zenith and Grom (Vympel and Alfa) The assassination strike team, pose in front of Tajbeg Palace.

Scouting the Palace



Not only was the palace hard to reach but it was a sprawling facility with many openings and perches for the PSD to rain down fire on attackers.

The Presidential Guard was certainly alert for adversarial intelligence activities. There were several security checkpoints as well as roving patrols around the palace. The guards were supposed to ensure that only authorized personnel entered the restricted area. Too many people seemed to have an all-access pass to the palace. There did not seem to be a working tiered access control system ensuring that, despite having entry to some areas, adversaries did not have access to others. Whether in the corporate or residential setting, having access controlled so that people can only reach the areas required for their specific work can help limit the potential impacts of insider threats.

In late November, Bogdanov masterfully elicited an invitation to the palace from Major Jandad. He told the head of the president's security that Moscow was worried about security accommodations for the new palace. Jandad offered Bogdanov a guided tour to allay his fears. The general, along with Ivanov and several KGB officers, were invited to inspect the palace, which they did quite thoroughly to assess it for potential future assaults and infiltration for intelligence purposes. The notes were compiled and locked in a safe at the Soviet embassy.^{lxxxvi}

On the 7th of December, two specialists from the Chief Directorate of Border Guards arrived in the country to study the communication lines for Amin's future residence.^{lxxxvii} They discovered that the palace, like all telephone communications, met at a junction at the Kabul Telephone Exchange. A single trunk of wires, a single fail point. This would be critical not only to Operation Storm-333 but also to Operation Baikal-79. Thus, Operation Well was born. On the night of the attack, saboteurs would drop a bomb inside the underground junction. The explosion would knock out the telephone lines and serve as the signal for all combat operations to commence.

The Soviets hosted a party for their Afghan counterparts in the Presidential Guard on the night of the 25th or 26th; the date varies across references. This was an intelligence activity. Numerous intelligence gaps still existed, and they deemed the best way to answer them was to get their Afghan counterparts drunk and elicit the information. Many toasts of vodka were had that night. The beauty of vodka is its clarity. While the Afghans were consecutively served vodka, the Soviet waiters often served their officers water leaving their marks none the wiser. While it appears the results of the mission were lackluster, one surprising piece of information was divulged. Lieutenant Ruzi, one of Taraki's murderers, revealed his hand in the killing. The Soviets had not believed Amin's claim that Taraki died of natural causes, but now they had a murderer's confession.

The commanders of Alpha and Zenith, Majors Romanov and Semenov, decided to conduct their own reconnaissance of the grounds outside the palace. They went to a nearby restaurant from which the whole of the terrain could be viewed. The restaurant was closed, but they told the proprietor they were scouting for a place to celebrate New Year's Eve.⁵ The proprietor let them look around. On their way back from their reconnaissance mission, they were stopped by Afghan soldiers and detained. They were held up for nearly four hours before the Afghans decided to let them go on their way.

Like almost every aspect of the events relayed herein, there is some discrepancy among accounts. British diplomat Rodric Braithewaite says in his book *Afgantsy* that this happened on the day the attack was supposed to occur. Therefore, he argues that the benefits almost did not outweigh the costs. Had the majors not eventually convinced their captors to let them go, their units would have had to go into battle without their leadership.^{lxxxviii} Dr. Lester W. Grau, the Foreign Military Studies Office's research director (currently at the time of this writing), stated in his article *The Takedown of Kabul: An Effective Coup de Main*, that this reconnaissance occurred the day previously.^{lxxxix} If Dr. Grau is correct, this would have presented less risk considering that Soviet officials would have likely sorted out the issue relatively quickly.

Oleg Balashov, a section commander of Alpha, conducted reconnaissance of the palace while operating undercover as a Soviet diplomat's bodyguard for several delegations leading up to the attack.^{xc} Yet, on the morning of the 27th, the strike team still lacked some of the required intelligence. General Yuri Drozdov, head of the KGB's Directorate of Illegal Intelligence, joined Major Yuri Kutepov, the KGB chief advisor to Amin's PSD, for a tour. He was able to create a sketch of each floor of the palace.^{xcii}

Just before the attack, the KGB forces finally received a detailed plan of the palace. Maps were marked with "locations of rooms, communications, electrical networks... the most convenient approach routes; guard duty; the total number of guards and bodyguards of Amin; location of machine-gun 'nests,' armored vehicles and tanks; the internal structure of the rooms and labyrinths of the Tajbeg Palace."^{xciii}

Directorate S Nearly Unravels the Plan

The KGB decided once again to try poisoning. On the one hand, it is understandable that the Soviets wanted to immobilize the president and reduce the probability that he could be secreted out of the palace in the fog of war. On the other hand, it seems pretty reckless to attempt this again when it could draw suspicion if it worked. They relied on the belief that the poison was supposed to take six hours to take effect. Just after dark,

⁵ New Year's Eve is celebrated on January 1st in the Soviet Union as it is with most of the world. The Afghans celebrate the 21st of March, Norwuz, as their New Year. Actual celebrations of the holiday are now and were banned under the previous Taliban rule as a pagan holiday.

Amin would start feeling very drowsy and retire to bed early. He would be well-doused by the poison and unable to wake by the time of the attack, making it difficult for the PSD to evacuate him if they so choose.

The Afghan president organized a party at the palace that afternoon. In part, it was to celebrate the return of Minister of Public Works Ghulam Dastagir Panjsheri from Moscow.^{xciii} He credited the minister's visit with strengthening the ties between the two countries as part of the reason the Soviets committed military forces to the nation. It was also a chance to show off his new palace. He invited many PDPA members and their families to attend. This created a burden on the PSD. There were many visitors and two separate parties as women and children were hosted separately from the men according to Afghan custom. Their focus would now very much be turned inward.

The KGB poisoner determined that Amin was prone to switching his food and drink, likely because he expected to be poisoned.^{xciv} The assassin slipped the poison into a pot of creamy vegetable and meat soup rather than attempt to try to poison a specific plate that might be switched. The poison proved as unpredictable as it had before. In the last attempt, the carbonation in Amin's soda kept him from sickening, while Asadullah did not fall sick until the next day. This time it worked much faster than intended or hoped. The poison began to work almost immediately on Amin and all of his guests. Foul play was immediately suspected, and the cooking staff was detained. Once again, Talybov slipped out of the palace, taking the rest of the Soviet dietary staff with him. There was also another possible suspect. Minister Panjsheri did not partake of the soup. In truth, or at least the story still holds, he did not do so because doctors in Moscow advised him to abstain from meat. There are no references that indicate he was a part of the plot. It seems he was simply lucky.

Luckily for the Soviets, the Afghans did not see the poisoning as an indicator of a Soviet plot. Jandad contacted the Central Military Hospital and the Soviet embassy clinic for emergency assistance.^{xcv} The Soviet ambassador, who was not informed of the plot, unknowingly put two of his countrymen in danger when he responded favorably to the Afghan political directorate chief's request for medical assistance. Ambassador Tabeyev sent Anatoly Alexeev and Victor Kuznichenko to save the man their own country was trying to kill.^{xcvi} They were accompanied by two women, one a doctor and the other a nurse. Upon arrival, they recognized that something was amiss and believed there was a lingering threat. Therefore, they sent the women back to the polyclinic in Kabul.^{xcvii} Interestingly, they lied about their reasoning to the Afghans for sending the women back, claiming that tests needed to be run. There is, unfortunately, no information as to why they did not share their suspicions of danger with their Afghan counterparts.

Calm Before the Storm

A few acts the Soviets did on that final day might have aroused the suspicion of their Afghan counterparts. First, Colonel Shvets managed to get the advisors out of the palace ahead of the fighting. He claimed that a birthday party was being thrown for one of the advisors and asked Major Jandad if all the advisors could leave the palace. It likely did not seem suspicious at the time. Colonel Shvets even invited the major and other senior Security Brigade officers.^{xcviii} However, in light of the palace being empty at the time of the poisoning and what was suspected as the prelude to a more significant attack, it might have seemed suspicious.

That morning, the Afghans lost one of their intelligence officers the Soviets believed was sent to spy on them. While a group of Afghan soldiers was unloading a delivery of blankets to the Soviets at the Muslim Battalion headquarters, one of them was identified as a KAM officer. The Soviets separated him from his comrades, locked him in a room, and placed a sentry on it.^{xcix}

Major Jandad's actions may have sealed the president's fate. Following the poisoning, he was observed by Colonel Shvets reconnoitering the Soviet positions. The GRU colonel later said that it was likely the Afghan major was simply inspecting the perimeter in case there was an assault from external forces. However, at the time, the paranoid Soviet officers worried that he was suspicious of them and recommended to their commanders that the attack be moved forward from its 9:30 pm time slot lest they come under attack from the

Afghans themselves. The attack was moved forward to 7:30 pm.^c After the fighting, Major Jandad said he had received a report that the Soviets planned to attack them, but he had not placed any credence in the rumor.

The Soviets had done an excellent job lulling the Presidential Guard into complacency. Starting on December 23rd, the 154th OSN began conducting nightly battle drills in which they mobilized troops and deployed vehicles. The Presidential Guard had alerted immediately on the first night, but when Major Jandad demanded to know what was going on, the GRU Spetsnaz told him that they conducted nightly battle drills to ensure the battalion was ready for battle. Afterward, the Afghans turned a blind eye to the simulated combat maneuvers. On December 27th, it would be no drill.

Storm-333

The Presidential Guard was active. Following the poisoning, Jandad placed the palace in a higher state of readiness. But he failed to recognize how immediate the threat was. Only one battalion, his 3rd Battalion, was mustered and handed out arms. The rest of the Security Brigade was at its normative status. Additional PSD personnel were dispatched to the palace, but there does not seem to be a full call-up of that unit either. He ordered floodlights to search the approaches for signs of activity.

Neutralizing the Security Brigade

The plan fell apart almost immediately. The 9th Battle Group managed to get inside the perimeter and hurried toward the PSD barracks. However, the 1st Battle Group discovered that the 3rd Security Battalion's troops were mustering for battle. Instead of continuing toward their objective of seizing the tanks, the battle group's commander took the opportunity to kidnap the 3rd Security Battalion's commander. Upon which, Afghan soldiers gave chase and began shooting. The 1st Battle Group stopped and opened fire, killing many Afghan soldiers. This pitted them in a fight with the 3rd Security Battalion. Colonel Kolesnik, the Muslim Battalion commander, abandoned the idea of capturing the tanks and ordered the fire support units to destroy them.

The 9th Battle Group hurried to its objective and encircled the PSD barracks, preventing Amin's off-duty bodyguards from rushing to the palace next door. The 3rd Battalion fought against the 1st Battle Group until the 6th Battle Group drove to the backside of their barracks and opened fire with an impressive fusillade that broke the unit's morale. The 1st and 2nd Battalions, along with the air defense and construction regiments, gave up with little resistance. The tankers tried to resist alongside the members of the 3rd Battalion but quickly found that their Soviet military advisors had sabotaged their tanks. Only one managed to be started before being destroyed.

The 8th Battle Group's mission was spectacularly successful. The platoon-sized element cut off the gunners from their air defense weapons before they could be manned. Only one gun, which had been being worked on at the time of the attack, was put into action and destroyed. The rest were captured intact, along with approximately 100 Afghan soldiers.^{ci}

Defeating the Presidential Security Detachment

The success of the 9th Battle Group in surrounding the PSD's barracks prevented them from reinforcing the palace. The 2nd and 3rd Battle Groups faced withering fire trying to reach their preplanned dismounting locations to assault the palace on foot. Bullets and grenades fired by their fire support units bounced off the palace's thick walls, creating a dangerous situation for them. Luckily, it kept many PSD officers from sticking their heads outside the palace.

The 2nd Battle Group's attempt to breach the main entry was rebuffed by heavy fire from defenders. Zenith's commander, Colonel Boyarinov, ordered his operators to toss in grenades to dislodge the defenders. The commandos fanned

out, breaking in via windows, a side door, and even using an antitank missile to create an alternate entrance.

The Afghan uniforms became a hindrance. To their credit, the Spetsnaz had been concerned about this, so they cut white strips of cloth and tied them around their arms to help distinguish themselves from the Afghan soldiers. However, since the officers of the Personal Security Detachment wore uniforms with white piping and belts, they ended up looking even more rather than less like their victims. The smoke and dirt darkened the bands. Lastly, they were shooting out the lights of the house. Colonel Boyarinov ran out of the palace to call for help from the 3rd Battle Group, which was bogged down and exchanging gunfire with the PSD officers courageous enough to stay near the windows, despite the suppressive heavy machine gun fire. The KGB officer, a WWII veteran, and a legend in his own right, was killed by a 7.62mm round, likely fired by one of his own that mistook him in confusion.

Once the members of the 2nd and 3rd Battle Groups linked up, they were able to sweep the palace. The KGB operatives used a pretty simple method. They would toss a grenade into a room and then spray it with gunfire. Members of the Muslim Battalion, which were supposed to stay outside, were required to assist.

The most serious concern was the grand staircases that led to the upstairs. Their main effort was up one of the staircases. The PSD officers were raining bullets and grenades downward. The KGB operatives brought a PKM machine gun to lay down suppressive fire and began tossing grenades over the banisters to clear the defenders. Before the PSD officers could regroup, the Spetsnaz stormed upwards and took the fight upstairs. It is also at this point that a serious fire breaks out. The defenders began surrendering with the palace in flames and their enemies reaching the second floor. It is of note that the Spetsnaz's orders were to leave no witnesses. Yet, veterans of the battle stated they were so weary of the death around them that they simply ensured that the Afghans that gave up indeed disarmed and told them to go downstairs and find someone to accept their surrender.

The two Soviet doctors the uninformed ambassador had dispatched were caught in the palace at the time of the attack. They were unaware it was their countrymen attacking the villa. Together, they pumped Amin's stomach and brought the president back to consciousness. In the fighting, they saw him wandering the halls, still in a stupor from the poison. He was wearing shorts and a t-shirt. They had removed his clothes earlier to treat him. They removed the IVs still in his arms and bound up the puncture wounds. Dr. Kuznechenkov, like Boyarinov, was an unfortunate victim of fratricide. A Spetsnaz officer killed a lone bodyguard guarding the room Amin was hiding in, and the bullets punched through the door striking the doctor.

There are multiple stories about how exactly the Afghan president died. One account is that, as with other rooms, a grenade was tossed inside, and he was struck by shrapnel. Sadly, his youngest son, age five, was also killed. Another story says that the KGB entered, matched him to a picture they carried, and then shot him. A third story states that the former communications minister, Gulyabzoy, identified him and carried out the execution. In speaking with other protection professionals, there is a consensus that the presence of more bodyguards providing close protection would not have changed the outcome. It was perhaps better that most of the guards rushed to fight the threat rather than collapse protectively around their principal.

Despite its 15:1 firepower and 7:1 manpower disadvantage, the Soviet troops completed their mission in 43 minutes. To their credit, almost every soldier and KGB operative that assaulted the palace was wounded and continued to fight despite their injuries. Reports of Soviet casualties range from five to 20 depending on reference and which units they included in their figures. They captured over 1,700 Afghan soldiers and are believed to have killed at least several hundred.

There was a backup plan in case Storm-333 failed. According to then-First Lieutenant Sharipov of the Muslim Battalion, he was later told by an Alpha Group operative that some commander in the rear had scheduled the assault to last for 50 minutes. If they did not report after that, it would be assumed that the attack had failed. An alternate plan would be executed. Multiple Rocket Launch Systems stationed miles away at



Colonel Grigory Boyarinov, head of the KUOS school, and Zenith commander, killed while leading the assassination mission.

Kabul International Airport would have bombarded the palace. Then the paratroopers from the 103rd Guards would have been sent to finish the job.^{cii}

Baikal-79



Under the guise of fraternal socialist military assistance, the Soviet 40th Army crossed the Amu Darya (Oxus River) on Christmas Day and raced to the Kabul Province to block the 7th and 8th Afghan Divisions from coming to Amin's aid.

Perhaps you have seen the Hollywood film *Olympus Has Fallen*, where the military rapidly deployed troops to come to the aid of the White House, albeit after the North Korean commandos managed to secure the residence. Why did that not happen at the Tajbeg Palace? It did not occur because the Soviets did not focus solely on defeating the president's security forces. They neutralized the response forces throughout the region as well.

As previously stated, one of the most significant problems in this study has been the reliability of witnesses regarding dates, times, and dealing with various translations. This unfortunate truth also rears its ugly head in this part of the story. Therefore, the story is presented from available source material referenced and discussed to provide utmost transparency and accuracy. What is agreed upon in the accounts is that there was at least one senior Afghan officer at Bagram Airbase that was antagonistic to the Soviets. Professor Hassan Kakar, in his book *Afghanistan: The Soviet Invasion and Afghan*

Response 1979-1989 names one A.H. Hakeemi as the base commander. Colonel Vladimir Sharipov of the 154th OSN does not name the individual in his account but describes him as the commander of the aviation regiment rather than the base. Regarding the discrepancy of duty positions, Dr. Kakar's account tells of Hakeemi being alive on December 18th, four days after Sharipov's account. The following story may concern an individual other than A.H. Hakeemi.

The Soviets were well aware that the commandant of the Afghan aviation regiment at Bagram was anti-Soviet. He was very suspicious of Afghanistan's friendly northern neighbor. His constant vigilance and attempts to surveil the Soviet operations in the USSR aerodrome on the base made the plotters worry that he might discover their intentions and thwart their plans. Therefore, the KGB decided to deal with him first. According to Colonel Sharipov, he witnessed the KGB kidnap the Afghan officer on the night of December 13th. Sharipov said the Afghan lieutenant colonel was walking down the airfield road, watching a Soviet IL-76 transport land. Suddenly the airfield's lights went out. KGB officers rounded up the Afghan officer, and after "giving him a powerful kick in the ass," they shoved him into a foreign car that took off immediately. Sharipov was surprised because the act was committed so early. His unit was not ready for military operations had the incident gone poorly and led to a conflict with the Afghans.^{ciii}

Indeed, since the December 14th coup did not occur, the disappearance of the aviation regiment commander might have caused alarm among Amin and the military leadership. A base or regimental commander does not simply disappear. It is important to remember that in such a small military force as Afghanistan, the lieutenant colonel was likely a part of the military command's inner circle despite his rank. Unfortunately, there is no information in the references reviewed for this study that gives any insight as to what hypotheses the Afghan military, political leadership, or intelligence service had regarding the officer's disappearance specifically.

However, if the account given by Colonel Sharipov concerns a person other than A.H. Hakeemi, it would be possible to hypothesize that the actions accredited to A.H. Hakeemi on December 18th were partially born from the disappearance of one of his base's most senior officers. According to Dr. Kakar, on December 18th, A. H. Hakeemi informed Amin that he believed that the Soviets might be preparing to do to Afghanistan what they had done to Czechoslovakia in 1968. Amin dismissed his concern, assuring him it would soon be okay.^{civ} Despite Amin's assurances, Hakeemi ordered his helicopters to fly over the Soviet section of the base to monitor the activities going on there.^{cv}

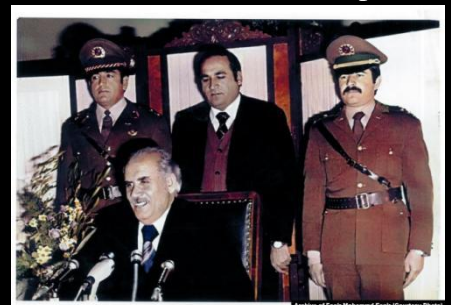
Why is there confusion about this story? Dr. Kakar's accounts of the takeover have several critical differences about events from many other references of the time, including eyewitnesses. There are some dubious statements in his book, which bring about the concern that perhaps the professor's work is not entirely accurate. From the critical analysis of the resources involved in this study, it is that the titles of aviation regiment commander and the airbase commander could be translation issues or a matter of choice as some military officers hold multiple command positions simultaneously. Secondly, in such a small military, there seems to be only one lieutenant colonel on the base considering the DRA force's low-rank structure. Even the commander of the Presidential Guard was a major, and the Army Chief of Staff, according to various sources, was only a colonel though other sources and, as used in this study, the title of general. Therefore, there is doubt that should be brought to the reader's attention for the concern of historical accuracy, and that in the search for truth, we cannot simply choose which version we like best or most believe but must identify where our doubts lie.

Whether Colonel Sharipov and Dr. Kakar speak of the same person, the concerns for the executive protection professional are the same. A key leader and supporter of the regime had just been removed from the chessboard. There were 13 days between that event and the assassination of the president. Combined with the initially suspected poisoning of Asadullah Amin the next day and the removal of another key figure in Amin's security forces' power structure, there should have been some red flags. Unfortunately, due to the political turmoil in Afghanistan, with murder and disappearances being a constant, this might have just been considered internal political intrigue by adversarial Parchamites or rebel mujahedeen.

Another significant commander may have been neutralized before the assassination as well. The Soviets had attempted to lure General Yaqub Khan out of the capital so they could neutralize him. They concluded that the Afghan military might follow him even if Amin was captured. Therefore, the Soviets told Amin that the Soviet Army divisions crossing the Amu Darya were to answer his request for the Soviets to guard the Hindu Kush in northern Afghanistan. They asked for a liaison. However, Amin sent one of two possible people instead. According to former US diplomat Peter Tomsen Amin sent his brother Abdullah to meet with the Soviet general. Abdullah was in charge of the Afghan forces in the country's north.^{cv} According to former UK diplomat Sir Rodric Braithwaite, the Soviet general met with Afghan General Babadzhan. According to a third source, both men met with a Soviet general of the 40th Army. Either way, records state that before the initiation of the combat operations, air assault troops landed at Kunduz and captured Abdullah Amin and/or Babadzhan.^{cvii}

The 15th Tank Brigade was one of the most significant threats the Soviets faced. Their commander, Colonel Ahmad Jan, received a phone call from Major Jandad after Amin's poisoning, telling him to mobilize one of his battalions and prepare to deploy it into Kabul. However, he never received the deployment order because the Spetsnaz team in charge of Operation Well successfully destroyed the telephone exchange before Jandad called back. Before his communications platoon could rig up long-range radio communications, a Soviet airborne unit broke the gates of his headquarters and encircled him and his staff. There was no violence. A Soviet captain told him it was a bad idea to go into the city, leaving the muzzles of their infantry fighting vehicles weapons to punctuate the message.^{cviii} The two Soviet advisors to the tank brigade had been left out of the loop. They had been actively prepping the readied battalion for movement into the city, unaware of their countrymen's plot.

The Afghan military headquarters, their version of the Pentagon, was taken over by a very small force of Soviet troops. The Soviet advisor to the Afghan defense minister brought the Russian general in charge of the recently airlifted troops to meet DRA Army Chief Yaqub Khan that night. The general was unaware of what was about to take place. Soviet advisors erupted into a brawl with their Afghan mentees when the bomb went off at the telephone exchange. Elsewhere, fourteen Spetsnaz operators had spread throughout the headquarters building, engaging guards in conversation and kindly offering them cigarettes. When the



Army Chief Yaqub Khan (right) stands behind Nur Taraki (center) the president he would betray to support Amin.

bomb detonated, they opened fire on the unsuspecting soldiers. There was a brief firefight before the military command staff surrendered. Yaqub was executed.

Soviet advisors throughout the military forces in Kabul had been working overtime to sabotage the Afghan Army's equipment. Before the night of the Christmas airlift, Soviet advisors had sabotaged air defense batteries in case the plot was discovered, or any mutinying Afghan officer attempted to shoot down the Soviet airplanes. The ground forces, including the Security Brigade, were similarly sabotaged. The Afghan tank unit guarding the Kabul radio station was ordered to drain their vehicles' fuel tanks because they were being supplied with replacements. The Afghan Seventh and Eighth Divisions were ordered to make an inventory of faulty ammunition. Inspecting the shells required them to unload their tanks. Over 200 Afghan army vehicles were disabled when Soviet advisors ordered the Afghan units to remove their batteries as a winterizing measure.^{cix} Elsewhere, advisors quietly cut the locks on the armories to their units' arsenals and installed their own.

The night of December 27th became one of feasting. Numerous banquets were thrown by KGB and Soviet Army advisors for the officer staffs of their respective units, leaving the units without commanders. When the attack occurred, it simply took a handful of armed soldiers to present themselves to the guests and inform them that they were being detained. Without direction, many units simply stood by while the Soviet Army seized their entire capital within a few hours.

It is not surprising that the Afghan troops that did manage to fight did not go to the aid of the palace. There was enough fighting going on in Kabul around them. The Soviets seized 17 key sites, including the military headquarters, the radio-television center, the ministry of affairs, the KAM and national police (Sarandoy) headquarters, the headquarters of the various military units, and the capitol. With so many strategic level sites just within the city to try to defend with so few able or willing troops, the palace itself, with its thousands, was left almost on its own. There was an attempt by a few tanks to reach the palace, but by then, Amin was long since dead, and the Soviets established defensive positions from which they were able to knock out several of the leading tanks with anti-tank missiles and halt the counterattack. Only approximately 100 Soviet soldiers were killed in the fighting, making Baikal-79 likely the most successful takeover of a nation in military history.

Once the Soviets seized the radio-television center, a message was played in which Amin was denounced by someone claiming to speak for the PDPA. The voice said that he had been sentenced to death and executed by order of the Revolutionary Council. Babrak Karmal, the Parchamite that Amin and Taraki had failed to kill, was named the new president. He had secretly built a relationship with the Soviets over the previous months and was seen as a puppet more controllable than Amin and the person who could unite the party. They were wrong. He would go on to spread his own reign of terror, now just with Parcham rather than Khalq in charge.

Lessons

Executive protection professionals might not think they have much to learn from this incident. After all, this was a force of highly trained Tier 1 special forces operatives supported by military forces, which took out a national leader similarly protected by elite troops. However, despite the scale, there are numerous similarities that even a small close protection team can learn from this situation.

1. Understand where the principal is in the scheme of things. The final impetus to kill Amin may not have come from something he specifically did. He was quite an annoying thorn in the side of the Soviets, but at the same time, he may have been killed as an example to other enemies of the Soviet Union. Some people, even presidents, are just convenient messages. If a national leader can be seen as means to send a message, then so can almost anyone in the world, including UHNW clients. Take a look at the book *From Russia with*



Babrak Karmal protected by Afghan PSD and KGB's 9th Directorate officers. The Soviets took a more direct handling of his security.

Blood. Several extremely wealthy people died in very suspicious and sometimes overt ways that appear to be a message not to make an enemy of Vladimir Putin. Think about Mexico, where officials that are tough against the cartels often die brutal deaths. Even here in America, there have been assassinations of ex-pats from foreign countries that have tried to raise awareness about foreign issues in their own country, such as the assassinations of the Little Haiti journalists from 1991 to 1993. This was done to send a message to Haitian emigres to stop trying to rouse US opposition to the Haitian military regime.

2. Understand that the reason that an adversary targets your principal does not have to be based on fact. The Soviet Politburo may have decided to assassinate Amin because they suspected he would go over to the Americans. Since his death, there has been no concrete evidence that this was ever the case. However, the appearance was there, potentially enough to make the Soviet leadership believe it would happen. An unfortunate saying is that “perception is reality.” People are often judged in the court of public opinion without any evidence. A modern-day comparison is how segments of the public automatically assume that anyone that ever went to Jeffrey Epstein’s island or was friends with the HNW individual must have taken part in the molestation of children. This could happen privately to your principal as well. Perhaps their spouse suspects them of cheating on them, or a member of the board suspects the principal is planning on firing them, so they decide to act on their suspicions violently.

3. The old saying “if you want something done right, then do it yourself” still applies. The Presidential Guard thought that if there was an issue, it could summon help from the numerous national police and military forces nearby. These units were rendered combat ineffective by the Soviet military advisors who sabotaged much of their equipment. Even had the Guard successfully summoned help, many units were in no condition to do so. When it comes to self-defense, we hear time and time again the reminder not to put one’s faith in the police coming to save them. Even with many EP teams’ very great relationships with their principal’s local police agencies, it is not a guarantee that they can or will be able to perform to the level you hope in a real emergency. The same goes for venue security or bringing in security for an event. That is why it is essential to have a way to truly gauge the readiness and capabilities of external support entities to ensure they can and will provide the services you contract them to provide.

4. Additionally, it is essential to understand just how motivated the support elements you rely on are to come to your aid. Amin, the butcherer, was a very unpopular ruler. Many soldiers likely simply lacked the will to fight and die for him. The Soviets knew that the mass of prisoners alone could overwhelm them if they chose. They made tea and provided the prisoners with food to try to tamp down any feelings of resistance. But the prisoners were content in their detainment. Many stayed huddled in their lodging throughout the night. In fairness, though, it could be attributed to shell shock. When interrogated later, many said they had no suspicions that the Soviets would ever attack them and found themselves wholly taken by surprise when it occurred.

5. Be careful about insider threats. Russia and, by proxy, the Soviet Union were Afghanistan’s longest allies and best supporters. Every echelon of the military, the Presidential Guard, and the intelligence service had Soviet advisors attached to it. This allowed the Soviets to sabotage the equipment, plant an assassin in the principal’s kitchen, and gather the intelligence on the residence needed for the killers to storm the villa. In later interviews, even post-incident GRU and KGB officers said that the Afghan guards should have stopped the paratroopers of the 9th Battle Group as their excuse for entering the perimeter did not make sense. While some of those veterans think that the guards were possibly subverted to allow this unusual occurrence, it is also possible that the Afghan guards just assumed someone superior to them forgot to tell them about this change of schedule and that their old buddies, the Soviets, would never do anything to hurt them: too much trust and too little verification. Personnel Security is an essential security discipline.

6. Just because the principal thinks the person is their friend does not mean the person is their friend. Amin was full of himself. He thought the Soviets had bought his cover story about Taraki’s death. He felt that he could blame them for his actions. He thought he could be ungracious to them for their decades of financial and military support to the country. He thought he could play them against the Americans. Just because the principal believes something does not mean you should buy into it. Likely those that have worked with

celebrities and HNW people have identified members of their entourages whom the principal seems blind to the fact that the person does not have their best interest at heart

7. Have a PACE plan for communications. The destruction of the telephone exchange significantly hampered contact with the outside world. The GRU also jammed radio transmissions. If your potential adversaries have that level of capabilities, you need to be able to use backups. The Presidential Guard ended up using flares to try to summon help. It is unknown whether anyone that could have responded saw these flares and if so, knew their purpose.

8. Be wary of desensitization. The Soviet battle drills starting on December 23rd lulled the Presidential Guard into complacency. Because the maneuvers happened nightly, they assumed that the Soviet activity on the night of the 27th was more of the same. Terrorists often use similar tactics to desensitize security forces to events before conducting an actual attack to slow response. Perhaps you deal repeatedly with teens trying to cut across the property or delivery drivers that forgot their badge that day. Maybe an alarm seemingly malfunctions often. Follow protocol each time. Be observant each time and be prepared to act. Complacency can get you and your principal killed.

9. Just because it seems improbable does not make it impossible. The Soviets achieved a victory despite an estimated 15:1 disadvantage. Cunning sabotage by the Soviet advisors helped reduce the Afghan advantage to an extent. Speed, surprise, and violence of action carried the mission the rest of the way. It is important to remember that offense has the advantage of going first, and reaction must be rapid to have any hope of counteracting the advantage of an adversary that chooses the place, time, and method of striking. If the offensive act is taking place, you are already behind the curve to a point you need greater speed or for them to miss the first time for you to have a chance of catching up.

About the Author

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